Monitoring student growth

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In most areas of learning, growth occurs over extended periods of time.

The ability to read with understanding, for example, develops over many years of school. Mathematical understandings and skills also develop over many years. In fact, in most school subjects, greater knowledge, deeper understandings and more sophisticated skills develop throughout the school years. This is also true of general skills and attributes such as problem solving and interpersonal and communication skills, which may develop not only across the school years but throughout life.

For this reason, teachers require a deep understanding of what long-term progress in an area of learning looks like.

Another reason teachers require a deep understanding of the nature of long-term learning progress is that, in any given classroom, students are likely to be at very different points in their learning and development. The most advanced 10 per cent of students in any school grade are typically five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent of students in that grade. If teachers are to provide all students in a class with learning experiences that will stretch and challenge them, they must be able to differentiate their teaching to meet the needs of students who are at quite different points in their long-term progress.

Much practice in schools does not encourage long-term perspectives on learning. Instead, learning is chunked into school years, semesters, units of work and topics. Defined bodies of curriculum content are delivered within these fixed timeframes, and all students are assessed and graded on how much of the content taught in each timeframe they have successfully mastered. Rather than focusing on where students are in their long-term progress, this approach often treats each new topic (or school year) as a fresh start – a self-contained body of content to be taught, learnt and assessed.

Underpinning this approach is an assumption that students in the same year of school are more or less equally ready for the same learning experiences and challenges. The result is that less advanced students often struggle. Some begin each school year well behind their age peers and unready for the material they are about to be taught. Many receive low grades year after year, not acknowledging the long-term progress they are actually making, and undermining their confidence in the relationship between effort and success. Not surprisingly, many of these students conclude that they are inherently poor learners and eventually disengage from school.

At the same time, more advanced students can remain unchallenged. Because they begin each school year well ahead of their age peers, more advanced students may achieve high grades on year-level expectations with minimal effort. As a result, these students sometimes make

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relatively little year-on-year progress, develop a sense of entitlement to high grades and also have limited understandings of the relationship between effort and success.

A growth mindset

Because progress in most areas of learning occurs over extended periods of time, it is important to be able to track the long-term progress that students make. This requires a shift in mindset. Rather than judging and grading all students on how well they have learnt what they have just been taught, assessment becomes a process of establishing and understanding where individuals are in their long-term progress. This means identifying the points they have reached – usually what they know, understand and can do at the time of assessment – and monitoring the progress they make over time.

A growth mindset in assessment includes a belief that, regardless of where students are in their learning at any given time, every student is capable of making further progress. Although students of the same age may be at very different points in their learning and may be progressing at different rates, every student is considered capable of successful progress if they are engaged, motivated to make the necessary effort and given appropriate (that is, well-targeted) learning challenges and opportunities. Excellent progress becomes an expectation of every student.

Mapping a learning domain

A prerequisite for monitoring long-term learning progress and meeting individual learners at their points of need is a picture of what long-term progress in a learning domain looks like – in other words, a 'map' of the learning domain that can be used to establish where students are in their learning and against which progress can be tracked.

An essential feature of a map is that it describes what it means to learn, develop, grow or improve. In most areas of learning, progress occurs as students acquire more advanced knowledge, deeper understandings and more sophisticated skills. A map describes and gives examples of increasing levels of knowledge, understanding and skill. Importantly, a map of this kind describes progress across a number of years of learning. It is more than a specification of what students are expected to learn; it is a picture of how learning occurs in practice, informed by student performance data.

Click here to view an example of such a map. Levels of increasing reading proficiency are shown here, with the lowest level at the bottom and the highest at the top. The kinds of reading skills typically observed at each level have been described. These descriptions are based on analyses of students' performances on a large number of reading comprehension tasks. Considered together, the described levels provide the beginnings of a 'map' of growing reading proficiency.

Map of increasing reading proficiency

The shaded regions to the right of the map show how reading proficiency is distributed and develops from Year 3 to Year 9 in Australia. The lower boundary is the reading level achieved by 95 per cent of students in each year group; the upper boundary is the level achieved by the top five per cent of students in each year group. When students are assessed regularly with the Progressive Achievement Tests, it is possible to plot the reading trajectories of individual

students against this picture of typical reading development. The dotted line illustrates how one student's reading trajectory might be plotted.

The advantages of a well-mapped learning domain – accompanied by quality assessment processes for establishing where students are in their progress within the domain – include the possibility of teachers, parents and students developing shared understandings of:

- the points individuals have reached in their learning at the time of assessment
- the knowledge, skills and understandings typically associated with those levels of attainment (by referring to the described proficiency levels)
- the kinds of teaching and learning likely to be beneficial in promoting further progress, and
- the progress (or growth) individuals make across the years of school.

Monitoring growth in this way depends on a growth mindset – a willingness to think in terms of long-term progress and to believe that every learner is capable of further growth, regardless of their current level of attainment.

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